MERMAIDS

ART, SYMBOLISM AND MYTHOLOGY

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: WHY MERMAIDS?

For thousands of years, mermaid legends and symbols have captured the imagination. The name 'mermaid' comes from the Middle English *měre*, 'deep and marshy lake or ocean', and *maiden*, meaning a virgin girl. The mermaid—a woman with the tail of a fish—appears in folklore all over the world, including Europe, the Middle East, the Caribbean, West and Central Africa, Central Asia, Japan and the populated Arctic regions. Because of this wide geographical range, mermaids show strong variations in their symbolic and mythological representations, while the meanings of these have changed over time. This book investigates the roots and evolution of mermaid iconography and mythology in the Western world, and its exploitation and dissemination in European cultures and art movements. Today, it is often believed that accounts and myths of mermaids have their origins in sightings of aquatic mammals that can resemble humans from a distance, such as manatees, dugongs or seals. In order to be able really to imagine women with fish tails, however, the observer is likely to have been told stories about the existence of such creatures or to have seen illustrations of them.

During the Early Middle Ages, the Christian world's vision of the mermaid was of a beautiful long-haired young woman with one or two fish tails instead of legs, commonly holding a comb and a mirror in her hands. She was the quintessential symbol of seduction, combining the image of a virgin with that of a soulless, immortal creature, but also encapsulating that profound human fear of the unknown in the depths of the sea. Anyone who has swum far out in the ocean, with no land in sight, can understand this well.

Mermaids are often depicted as half-human, half-animal creatures and sometimes as the guardians of gates, such as in mermaid reliefs on porticos around the doors of Romanesque churches. From a Christian perspective, a natural relationship with a human being would never be possible, so, despite all her female attraction, a mermaid remains a virgin forever. This paradox has been the major inspiration for mermaid tales, songs and images.

Figure 1.1 A mermaid with a mirror and a comb, symbols of vanity or luxury, carved on a wooden pew in St Senara's Church, Zennor, Cornwall, *c.* sixteenth century.

Figure 1.2 Medieval illumination showing a mermaid luring a sailor to his death (left) and a centaur (right), 1250–1300. The mermaid and centaur were commonly depicted as a couple in early medieval times.

The first illustrations of Christian fish-tailed mermaids appeared in manuscripts in Central and Western Europe in the eighth century, if not earlier. These were accompanied by myths that mermaids bewitch mariners with their songs, to lure them off course to be wrecked on the rocks (Figure 1.1), and that treasures from these wrecks are hidden in their deep-sea lairs. This is the same fatal lure as that of the Sirens, described in Homer's *Odyssey* (*c.*700 BCE); however, the Sirens were half-human, half-bird creatures of Greek mythology, very different in appearance to the mermaids of medieval times. Meanwhile, another seductive technique employed by mermaids is to swim close to ships to embrace sailors, who are then dragged slowly under water to their doom (Figure 1.2).

To create a common baseline for modern understandings of the mermaid myth in the Western world, the following definition will be used: a mermaid is a half-human, half sea-fish creature with the upper body (from the head to the hip) of a pretty young woman and with one or two fish tails instead of legs. There are no descriptions or illustrations of aged mermaids. An anatomical impression of a mermaid with a single fish tail by the Brazilian contemporary artist Walmor Corrêa is given in Figure 1.3. Mermaids should not be confused with the selkies of north European folklore, which resemble a seal in the water but a woman on land, nor with the nymphs of Celtic mythologies and the rusalka of Slavic mythologies, both of which do not have fish tails and live in fresh water or in the forest.

It is said that mermaids have beautiful voices, which they use to sing their seductive songs. Some mermaids can speak, others not. Those who cannot may learn a human language if they come into contact with humans. A mermaid does not have a soul, but might attain one if she falls in love with a human, a characteristic that first appeared in fifteenth-century tales. Most intriguing is the notion that when a mermaid enters the human world on land, the fish tail(s) transforms

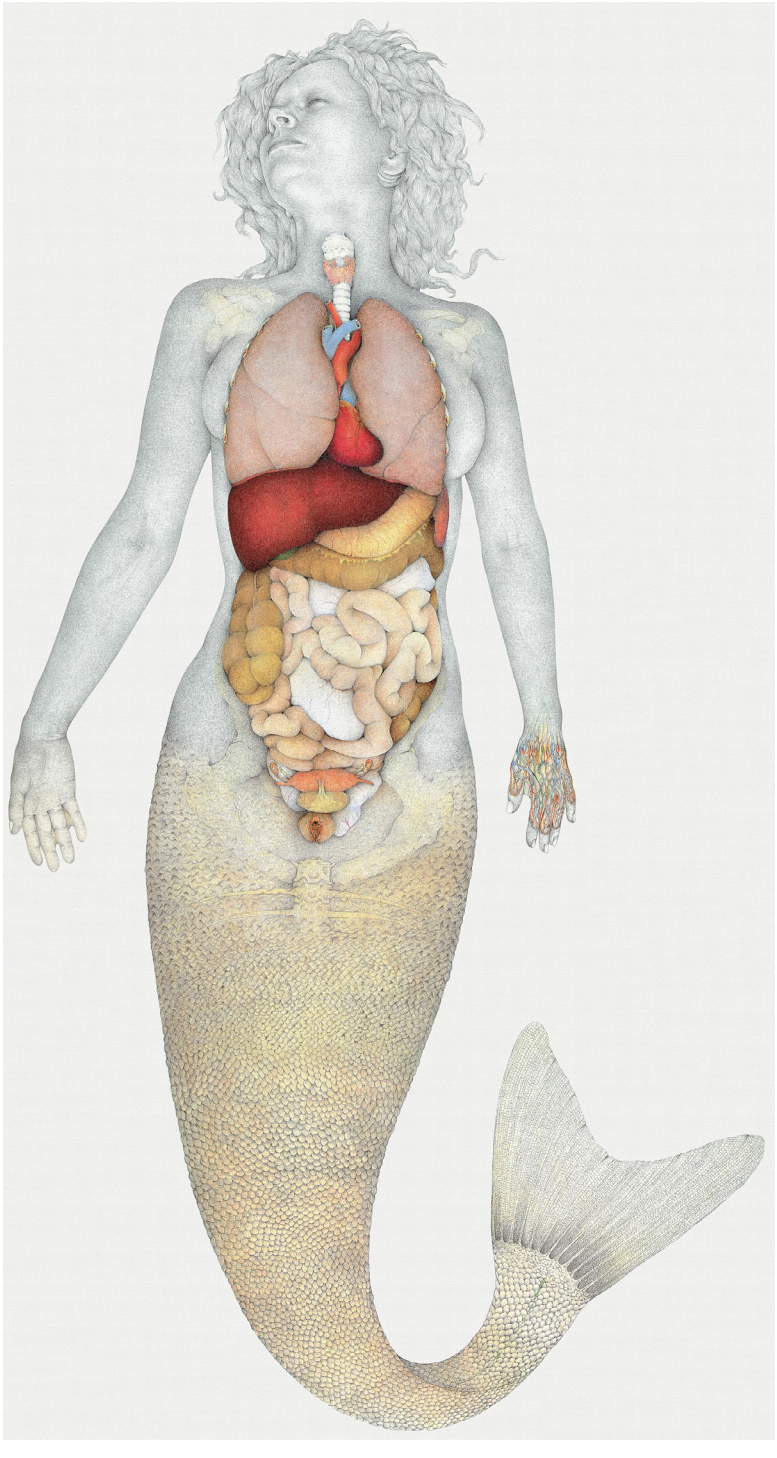

Figure 1.3 *Ondina* by Walmor Corrêa, 2006: an artist's impression of the inner organs of a mermaid.

into human legs within the space of few minutes, a metamorphic process called shapeshifting. Unfortunately, human interaction with a mermaid usually leads to the death of the person involved, wherein lies a crucial dilemma in proving the existence of mermaids: all witnesses who have been in direct contact with them have disappeared. There are also of course no fossil records or remains of deceased mermaids.

The idea for this book arose on a stormy December night while listening to miners' Christmas songs in St Senara's Church, Zennor, near Pendour Cove in west Cornwall. Cornwall is the home of numerous mermaid tales, in particular at Zennor where, according to legend, a tragic event took place in the sixteenth century. This is captured in a carving of a mermaid on a bench in St Senara's Church (Figure 1.1). The Land's End peninsula, where the village of Zennor is located, is the very western tip of Cornwall, a wild and mysterious land. Around its coast, the sea sings constantly. Here, when staring out into the fog-cloaked ocean towards the coastal islets and skerries, it is easy to imagine mermaids intoning their seductive and fatal melodies, providing the material for mysterious tales.

In this book, emphasis has been placed on the theme of the mermaid figure in the Christian world, with a primary focus on Western Europe. Here, the possible roots of the mermaid mythology, its cultural evolution and its mythological and pictorial metamorphosis through the centuries are described and illustrated with examples from visual art, literature, music and architecture. It is the nature of myths to change over time, and different versions can exist concurrently. The mermaid features extensively in the literature and art of many cultures and eras and has been passed on in a great diversity of tales. This book focuses on a few art objects and their specific stories which—we think—are representative of the different cultural periods of ancient and modern civilizations in the Middle East and Europe. We do not aim to provide a complete list of art objects related to the mermaid theme or a complete history of mermaids in art, but rather attempt to address a number of questions related to the origin and evolution of mermaid mythology, such as why the Aramaean deity Antargatis is considered to be the mermaid goddess, how and why the ancient half-woman, half-bird Sirens transformed morphologically into Sirens with fish tails during early Christian times, when and why the first mermaid with a brassiere appeared, and so on. These questions have already been considered by researchers in numerous articles; our book attempts to compile this knowledge in a thought-provoking and comprehensible way. References are provided to inspire the reader to explore specific topics in more detail.

Our story commences in Mesopotamia, where the oldest preserved illustrations of half-human, half-fish creatures have been recorded. Only by starting at the beginning is it possible to identify and understand the roots of Western mermaid mythology. Women with fish tails are among the oldest and still most

popular mythological creatures. The puzzle surrounding the archaic meaning of the mythical mermaid figure has fostered continuous reinterpretations, so that new stories and depictions have emerged. The myths and legends of the Mesopotamians, our knowledge of which is very fragmentary, were partially incorporated and adopted within the mythologies of the ancient Greek, Etruscan and Roman cultures. The fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 CE, however, caused another loss of stories and depictions. As a result of the establishment and spread of the Christian religion during early medieval times, ancient mythological figures were confused, transformed and reinterpreted by Christian clerks and historians to teach morality and to create a fear of soulless creatures. In Chapter 3, we offer an explanation for this transmutation as documented in the form of cultural objects and historical texts. From there, the evolution of Christian mermaid mythology can be traced to the present day, illustrated and described through representative art objects that are to be found in Chapters 4 and 5. Over time, the myth of the mermaid underwent multiple changes, which constitute a cultural evolution. This book aims to develop a better understanding of that process. It is not the intention to provide a complete and exhaustive history, applying a purely scientific approach, but to examine some of the steps in the development of the mermaid myth, to challenge conventional views and to inspire future studies. The closing chapter describes, probably for the first time, mermaids in the light of evolutionary theory, through an examination of the fantastical idea that mermaids lie on a side branch of human evolution.

Finally, we would like to note that we are aware of the existence of merman depictions and tales. The merman is the male form of half-human, half-fish creatures, and in Western cultures they are much less often described or depicted than their female counterparts. To most people, mermen are less attractive and seductive than mermaids, and therefore they seldom appear in Western art. Yet male half-human, half-fish beings seem to have been much more common in Assyrian and Babylonian art, and are therefore probably much older than the female versions (e.g. Green, 1986), as discussed in Chapter 2. The following chapters focus on female half-human, half-fish creatures, a topic so vast and complex that it deserves more than one book.